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High quality / high equity systems of education: Curriculum, teachers and reform in the search for equitable outcomes for all students.

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The issue of what an effective high quality / high equity education system might look like remains contested. Indeed there is more educational commentary on those systems that do not achieve this goal (see for example Luke & Woods, 2009 for a detailed review of the No Child Left Behind policy initiatives put forward in the United States under the Bush Administration) than there is detailed consideration of what such a system might enact and represent. A long held critique of socio cultural and critical perspectives in education has been their focus on deconstruction to the supposed detriment of reconstructive work. This critique is less warranted in recent times based on work in the field, especially the plethora of qualitative research focusing on case studies of 'best practice'. However it certainly remains the case that there is more work to be done in investigating the characteristics of a socially just system. This issue of *Point and Counterpoint* aims to progress such a discussion. Several of the authors call for a reconfiguration of the use of large scale comparative assessment measures and all suggest new ways of thinking about quality and equity for school systems. Each of the papers tackles different aspects of the problematic of how to achieve high equity without compromising quality within a large education system. They each take a reconstructive focus, highlighting ways forward for education systems in Australia and beyond. While each paper investigates different aspects of the issue, the clearly stated objective of seeking to delineate and articulate characteristics of socially just education is consistent throughout the issue.

In moves to frame what high quality and high equity systems might encompass, it has become common to call on the results of large scale comparative tests or assessment measures in the valued disciplines of science, mathematics and the more generic skill of literacy, such as those recorded as part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) regimes of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) (OECD, 2005) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) regimes of TIMSS (The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) (Thomson, Wernert, Underwood, &

Nicholas, 2008). Andreas Schleicher (2008) uses the PISA results to demonstrate that education systems can 'do better' and that excellence in education is achievable, despite what he calls a common held "belief that overall performance in education cannot be raised" (p. 72). Schleicher compares systems like Finland and Ontario that have consistently received excellent results and small between or within school differentiation, with countries such as Australia that consistently achieve results that demonstrate a high quality system, but that also struggle to narrow the equity gap between schools and students. His analysis points to factors related to social services and a focussed attempt at ensuring all students – regardless of gender, race, location or socio economic background – receive equitable access to high quality education as important features of those systems able to boast high quality and high equity. This requires a system that does not differentiate on the basis of the parental capacity of a student to contribute to education (as an example of a differentiated system on these grounds, Australia is increasingly producing a two or three tiered system set within institutional structures of public and privately funded schools), nor solely on so called 'intellect' (an example of such a system would be Germany where streaming of pathways in institutionalised throughout the system).

Schleicher (2008) discusses the characteristics of systems that do not achieve high quality and high equity as being structured on uninformed prescription and uninformed professionalism. Uninformed prescription describes the overly constraining processes of accountability and surveillance such as those currently evident in the US. Matched with a lack of opportunity and resources within a system for teachers to make evidenced-based and contextually logical decisions about pedagogy and assessment (uninformed professionalism) such centralised prescription results in a system unable to respond to the needs of, or to promote high quality outcomes for, all of its students. Instead Schleicher promotes an approach to curriculum that sets out the essential expectations of learning (informed prescription) within a context where teachers are expected and supported in "local curriculum interpretation, translation, development and implementation" (informed professionalism) (Luke, Weir & Woods, 2008, p. 25).

In a recent report delivered to the Queensland Studies Authority, Luke, Weir and Woods (2008) developed these concepts further in our quest to present a set of principles to guide syllabus design in the State. We suggest that seeking to balance

professionalism with prescription in a systematic and contextually logical fashion is the very basis for providing syllabus and curriculum for a high quality / high equity system. Based on our claim that the syllabus should only ever be considered a 'map' of the curriculum as valued at any given point in time, and not as a document able to prescribe the sum total of the curriculum – a much broader term than syllabus in our working of the field – we suggest a focus on the technical form of the curriculum and not content. According to our recommendations informed prescription can be achieved through low definition 'economical' curriculum in the form of a syllabus that "maps out basic expectations about the essential knowledges, competencies, skills, processes and experiences, along with mandated accountability routines that allow space for local assessment for diagnostic and programmatic purposes" (Luke, Weir & Woods, 2008, p. 1). This provides the means for a strong centralised and local focus on equity, the expectation and focus being on "the potential of all learners to meet high expectations and standards" (p. 1). Founding a system on informed professionalism requires provision of spaces where teacher autonomy to "interpret the syllabus" (p.2) and curriculum of the system "with opportunities for local curriculum planning, rich professional development activities" (p. 2) and the expectation that capacity for classroom based assessment and curriculum adaptation to ensure equitable access for all groups is present and developed in the workforce (Luke, Weir and Woods, 2008, p.2).

In this issue the aim has been to provide commentary on some of the key issues that allow a more rigorous investigation of the achievement of high quality / high equity education. Deb Hayes begins the issue by detailing some of the implicated practices in Australia's inability to provide for our most disadvantaged students. Hayes first describes the range of differentiation practices evident in the Australian education context, heralded as they are as measures for increasing consumer choice. Hayes points out how such practices result in the accumulation of human, economic and material resources in some schools at the expense of others. At the same time there has been a trend from public to private education within the middle classes and aspiring middle classes, resulting in a shifting of students who are well suited to achieve in schools to amass in some schools and not others. She explains the implications of what she calls 'residualisation' and the part played by the process in creating a system that no longer even masquerades as one based on the principles of

meritocracy. The call for innovation – locally configured – as a means to shift education systems toward more equitable access for all made by Hayes, requires informed prescription and informed professionalism as discussed above. The centrally set expectation that all children will be provided with essential knowledges and skills for future pathways (informed prescription) is balanced with local teacher professionalism that allows for innovative service-based programs to respond to young people and their lives (informed professionalism).

After setting the ground of policy and curriculum reform with Deb Hayes, the issue extends this ground as Tom Griffiths answers the call to explore the term social justice as it relates to providing a high quality / high equity schooling system. Griffiths joins with the other authors featured here in making the case that our current context is one configured around ongoing national and international concern about improving quality with equity in education, and thus it is timely to problematise three foundational concepts of dominant conceptualisations of the project of social justice: "1) the equating of social justice with improved equity for more authentically meritocratic outcomes; 2) the lack of space for more fundamental challenges to existing constructions of high-status knowledge; and 3) the lack of attention to wider social and economic change, as part of the struggle to construct a more equal, just and democratic world-system in which socially just educational systems that contribute to the transformation of society, can be built." (Griffiths, this issue) Noting the "substantial evidence of ongoing and exacerbated levels of social and economic inequality globally", Griffiths uses the case of contemporary Venezuela, as a model of how systems might begin to construct a system of public education that contributes to the process of providing equitable outcomes for all students by moving beyond compensatory approaches based in deficit ways of thinking and knowing.

David Zyngier takes a different approach to Hayes and Griffiths when he critiques the findings of recent reports by social economists on the issue of 'quality' within our schooling system. Challenging claims of both a drop in teacher quality and student outcomes, and the explanations provided in these recent reports, Zyngier produces a complexly layered statistical critique of the very foundations of the latest 'education crisis' debates playing out in the media and policy contexts of Australia. The paper convincingly concludes that current claims "do not stand up to scrutiny as their

methodological assumptions and tools are inappropriate (for the task) and their conclusions at best unreliable" (Zyngier, this issue).

The final two papers in this issue deal with issues specifically related to phases and transitions. Susan Grieshaber begins by discussing issues of quality and equity in systems, with a particular focus on the early years of schooling (including the year prior to compulsory schooling, variously labelled in Australia as, for example, preparatory, reception or preschool). Drawing on evidence collected as part of several large-scale quantitative and qualitative investigations, Grieshaber considers the role of curriculum in achieving high quality and equity. She provides a review of past attempts to improve outcomes for those considered at risk or disadvantaged, suggesting instructive findings from these attempts. She then moves to consider key concepts relating specifically to the early years of education as they are playing out within Australia's latest 'education revolution': equity of access; syllabus design and curriculum; and transitions.

Tackling issues related to another well-established 'phase' in education - the middle years of schooling - is the paper presented here by Lisa Patel Stevens and lisahunter. While developing an argument about the place of education in the lives of youth, Patel Stevens and lisahunter work to challenge and supplement the debate about what a high quality / high equity system might entail "by reinforcing that the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the practices of curriculum mapping need to be rewritten, to account for unknowability, description rather than prediction, and the subsequent roles for teachers and students that are enabled within such practices" (Patel Stevens & lisahunter, this issue). Patel Stevens and lisahunter work to demonstrate how the rearticulation of Darwin's original findings over time has falsely highlighted a notion of an essentialised truth and a sense that his theories and ways of knowing might be used for purposes of predictability rather than for description. In the original works, Darwin worked to suggest description and not predictability. "Just as Darwin urged his readers to engage in the difficult conviction that it is impossible to predict how a species will interact with another or its environment, educationalists should also be charged with the difficult but necessary inability for syllabi or curricula to be overly predictive for individuals from afar" (Patel Stevens & lisahunter, this issue). The logic of this argument leads Patel Stevens and lisahunter to echo Tom Griffiths in his call for changes to curriculum and pedagogy that go well beyond

cosmetic adjustment, “rather the very role, shape, and positionality of curriculum needs to be reconsidered” (Patel Stevens & lisahunter, this issue).

It is evident that to achieve a truly high quality and high equity system of education in Australia will require detailed consideration of schools, reform and pedagogy, teachers and students, learning and knowing, knowledges, skills and the processes and practices required to prepare students for their life pathways. Curriculum will take its role here, and systems need to work toward getting the balance between prescription and teacher professionalism, moving beyond the deficit games of ‘blame’ and the seeking of easy answers to complex problems. However as educational drivers we also need to consider the calls made by the authors in this issue for a truly reconfigured, redistribution of resources and access within our system. As Hayes reminds us in this issue “if you are disadvantaged in Australia, the education system as a whole does not serve you well” (Hayes, this issue). What might it require for our systems to move beyond a situation where the only way to get ahead in school if you are poor is to “choose richer parents” (Connell, 1993, p. 22)?

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[1] An edited collection (Luke, Woods & Weir, 2010) based on this original report is currently in press with Routledge entitled *Unpacking the curriculum: Equity, quality and syllabus design*